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AN AFFIRMATIVE EXPOSITION
OF
AMERICAN CIVIL RELIGION

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JOHN H. CARTWRIGHT

The Baccalaureate Sermon given to the Boston University class of 1939 by the then President of Boston University, Daniel L. Marsh, was titled "The American Canon". In that Sermon he preached "Americanism". The audience that he had in mind was not merely those who were assembled in Symphony Hall and those who were listening over the radio; indeed, he was speaking to all Americans.

President Marsh was particularly distressed by the peculiar forms that the patriotism which had been generated for and by World War I had taken after the War was over. He viewed America as being threatened from both the right and the left. on the one hand, there were those sincere patriots who "became so zealous in their defense of what they thought was essential to the safe-guarding of America that they manifested an un-American spirit." On the other hand, secret and open "promulgators of subversive doctrines took advantage of the confusion for the dissemination of un-Americanism under the guise of liberal Americanism."¹ Intolerance, bigotry, and political hypocrisy were the inevitable result; with that result made even more untenable by the claim of both groups that they represented true American patriotism.

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¹ Daniel L. Marsh, The American Canon (New York: Abingdon Press, 1939), p.5. It is interesting to note that this post World War I situation was repeated in post World War II America.

Into the breach, then, stepped Marsh as the defender of orthodoxy. Surely somewhere, he felt, "there were some documents that all Americans would accept as the undisputed creed, or 'Bible' of Americanism."² His conclusion was that

"there are certain American writings so significant, so inspired, so esteemed by Americans, so durably valuable to the American people, so pregnant with the essence of the American spirit, so revelatory of the genius of America, that, taken together, they constitute the authoritative rule of Americanism."³

The result was "The American Canon".

Utilizing, therefore, the analogy with the canonical books of the Bible, President Marsh said in part:

"1. The genesis of American democracy is in the Mayflower Compact. In the beginning was the Pilgrim colony with that positive, original, social Compact which is the legitimate source of government.

2. Our exodus is in the Declaration of Independence. That immortal document marks the going out of the American people from tyrannical bondage to the promised land of liberty and self-government.

3. Our book of the law is the Constitution of the United States. The counterpart of the Mosaic Ten Commandments in the political history of America is our Bill of Rights, the first ten amendments to the Constitution. The Ten Commandments of the Old Testament uttered their 'thou shall not's' to individuals. In our American ten commandments, the American people issue 'thou shalt not's' to their government.

4. We have our major and minor prophecies, the greatest of them all being George Washington's Farewell Address. Both as a foretelling and forthtelling document, that thundering prophecy bears a relation to the American people comparable to the utterances of Isaiah and Jeremiah to the Hebrew people.

5. Our national psalms are not numerous; but in spite of the fact that it is made the butt of ridicule and shallow criticism, The Star-Spangled Banner bears a relation to our national feelings not unlike that which the greatest of the psalms of David bore to the feelings of the people who first sang them.

6. The gospel of true Americanism was spoken by the savior of America. I refer to Abraham Lincoln's Second Inaugural Address. It was good news when first it was uttered: it is good news still.

7. We have our epistles, the greatest of them all being the last article written by Woodrow Wilson. It will endure as long as our present system endures, the vision and the judgment of the man who

² Ibid., pp. 5-6.

³ Ibid., p. 9.

possessed the clearest insight and the finest analytical mind of any national leader in the history of America."⁴

Despite the levity with which some Americans today may evaluate these analogies, Marsh was not stating a radically new point of view on American culture. Rather, he was endeavoring at the same time to inform the minds of young Americans and to refresh the memories of older Americans regarding, what he thought to be, the essential content of the doctrine of Americanism. His purpose was not merely to lift up the vital ideals that had a formative influence in American history, but more importantly to preach "the faith that has made America great; that we may have an intelligent understanding of the progress and toleration in which America has found its spiritual enlargement, and recognize the vision of America as the messiah of nations."⁵

In fact, President Marsh was attempting to delineate under the rubric of the "American Canon" that American phenomenon which historians such as Ralph Gabriel, Yehoshua Arieli, and Daniel Boorstin have conceptualized as the "American Creed", the "democratic faith", and "culture religion". Although himself a Christian and a Protestant clergyman, Marsh was not speaking about Christianity or exclusively to Christians. Although he adopted figures from the Judeo-Christian tradition; he was nevertheless seeking to characterize the American tradition, the American faith, the American "civil religion".⁶

⁴ Ibid., pp.9-10. Emphasis supplied. Obviously, Marsh considered Wilson to be America's St. Paul.

⁵ Ibid., p. 11. A June, 1939 editorial in the Boston Herald even suggested that the content of Marsh's address be given in some form and on some appropriate occasion to the whole student body of Boston University. "What better could bring home to a body of students what it is that constitutes the fiber of Americanism," the editorial concluded.

⁶ Indeed, said Marsh of the "books" of "American Canon", one "divine drive of purposive idealism breathes through all of them." See p. 75.

Although the idea of a "common faith" had been present in the American ethos since the days of the founding fathers, it was not until the last two decades that students of religion began to take as seriously "general religion" in America as they had "church religion" in America. This new perspective or, more accurately, new interest on the part of scholars was evoked primarily by the post World War II debates about theory and method in the Sociology of Religion generally, and the efforts to understand the phenomenon of secularization in particular. It was out of this intense activity that the concept - as distinguished from the idea - of "civil religion" emerged. This concept subsequently captured the sociological imagination and became the commonly accepted term for describing, analyzing, and interpreting the "common faith" of America. What precisely, then, is "civil religion?"

In 1951 Robin Williams used the term "common religion" to denote a "common set of ideas, rituals and symbols" which serve to create "an overarching sense of unity, even in a society riddled with conflicts."⁷ Later on, Robert Bellah elaborated this idea of a religion which is common to a people, by using Rousseau's phrase, "civil religion."⁸ Bellah rejected the term "common religion" because of the tendency to interpret it as nothing more than "national self-worship," in the sense that Will Herberg identified the "American Way of Life" as the object venerated by "American religion."⁹ Rejecting equally the notion that Christianity is the national faith, he proposed that

"there actually exists alongside of and rather clearly differentiated

⁷ Robin M. Williams, Jr., American Society: A Sociological Interpretation (New York: Knopf, 1951), p. 312.

⁸ In chapter 8, Book 4 of The Social Contract, Rousseau cites the dogmas of the civic religion: existence and attributes of God, immortality with rewards and punishments, sanctity of social obligations, and religious toleration. The articles of the civic faith are fixed by the sovereign people and loyalty to those articles is pronounced essential to good citizenship.

⁹ See Will Herberg, Protestant - Catholic - Jew (New York: Doubleday, 1960).

from the churches an elaborate and well-institutionalized civil religion in America....not only that there is such a thing, but also that this religion - or perhaps better, this religious dimension - has its own seriousness and integrity and requires the same care in understanding that any other religion does."¹⁰

Bellah's observation suggests that if by "church religion" is meant those beliefs and practices which are prescribed, regulated, and socialized by particular religious institutions; then "civil religion" would be contrastingly described as those beliefs and practices of an overtly religious nature which fall outside the dominion of a prevailing religious institution. What is indicated here is the recognition that religion need not necessarily be found in the organized form which has characterized a religion such as Christianity.¹¹ This recognition is potentially revolutionary for the study of religion because it opposes the traditional view of religion as fundamentally organizational and asserts that "the norms of traditional religious institutions - as congealed in an 'official' or formerly 'official' model of religion - cannot serve as a yardstick for assessing religion in contemporary society."¹² Hence, in addition to focusing on the structure of institutional belief systems, Bellah and other researchers in religion are beginning to investigate the structure of the popular belief system - "that part of the sacred cosmos which lies outside the official dogmas."¹³

Thus, scholars have dug into a variety of sources for indices of American

¹⁰ Robert N. Bellah, "Civil Religion in America" in Robert N. Bellah, Beyond Belief (New York: Harper and Row, 1970), p. 168.

¹¹ For example, Indian religion does not exhibit anything like so prominent an ecclesiastical or organizational character as does Christianity.

¹² Thomas Luckmann, The Invisible Religion (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1967), p. 91. In this regard, therefore, the study of secularization cannot be overly concerned with the churches because they present a deceptive indicator of religiousness.

¹³ See Robert Towler, Homo Religiosus: Sociological Problems in the Study of Religion (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1974), p. 149.

Civil Religion. The richest vein, by far, and the one most often mined has been the pronouncements of great American political figures. It is commonly recognized that from the earliest days of the republic, national leaders have appropriated religious themes and language. The first President of the United States, in his inaugural address in 1789, felt constrained to offer "supplications to that Almighty Being who rules over the universe" and to admonish his listeners that "the propitious smiles of Heaven can never be expected on a nation that disregards the eternal rules of order and right which Heaven itself has ordained." Our present President, Mr. Ford, not only rested his hand on Proverbs 3:56¹⁴ when he was sworn into office, he also pardoned Richard Nixon "on the grounds that he, as 'humble servant of a merciful God' was obliged to show mercy."¹⁵

Thomas Jefferson likened the "exodus" of the colonists from Europe to America to the flight of the Israelites from Egypt to the Promised Land, with both groups persevering in "the favor of that Being in whose hands we are." John F. Kennedy reaffirmed, at his inauguration, the religious legitimation of the office of the presidency when he said, "I have sworn before you and Almighty God the same solemn oath our forebears prescribed nearly a century and three quarters ago." He went on to state, rather reminiscent of Jefferson, that "the rights of man come not from the generosity of the state but from the hand of God." That address was concluded with these solemn words:

"With a good conscience our only sure reward, with history the final judge of our deeds, let us go forth to lead the land we love, asking His blessing and His help, but knowing that here on earth God's work must truly be our own."

¹⁴ "Trust in the Lord with all thine heart; and lean not unto thine own understanding. In all thy ways acknowledge him, and he shall direct thy paths." (KJV).

¹⁵ J. Robert Nelson, "The Theology of Gerald R. Ford" in United Methodists Today, 2(February, 1975), p. 3.

In addition to the utterances of politicians, some find manifestations of the civil religion in such items as: the national "religious" holidays and ceremonies, the public mourning rituals accompanying the assassination of a national figure, the addition of the words "under God" to the Pledge of Allegiance to the flag, the institutionalization of prayer services in the White House, and the presence of an interdenominational room for prayer and meditation in the Capitol building. Walter Muelder's attempt to summarize these and other manifestations of the civil religion is quite instructive. He states that if you take as a whole such indices as,

"parts of the Declaration of Independence, the Bill of Rights, the deism of Franklin and Jefferson, the hymn 'America', Washington's 'Farewell Address', Lincoln's Gettysburg Address and Second Inaugural, his re-establishment of Thanksgiving Day, the century-long tradition of orations on July Fourth, the vision of this country as the Promised Land and the model for all nations to follow, the repeated allocution to God in the speeches of Presidents when they are inaugurated or deal with great crises or goals, and the inculcations of democratic values in the public school system with (until recently) prayers and the salute to the flag - and you have a pattern of civic piety which you can readily recognize. Add to this our ethos of good sportsmanship, training in the Scouts and Campfire Girls, and belief in the soundness of our economic system - and you have a cluster of meanings and value that comprise what some people mean when they speak about this country being a Christian nation."¹⁶

Notwithstanding the fact that much is selectively derived from Christianity, it is a mistake to overstate the specifically Christian element in American Civil Religion. Bellah makes this point when he argues that

"this religion is clearly not itself Christianity...neither Washington nor Adams nor Jefferson mentions Christ in his inaugural address; nor do any of the subsequent presidents, although not one of them fails to mention God. The God of the civil religion is not only rather 'unitarian', he is also on the austere side, much more related to order, law, and right than to salvation and love."¹⁷

¹⁶ Walter G. Muelder, "Beyond Civic Piety." A sermon preached in Marsh Chapel, Boston University, on February 7, 1971.

¹⁷ "Civil Religion in America," p. 175.

It is perhaps more accurate then to describe American Civil Religion as having many religious roots with little explicit relationship to specific historical religious doctrines. Emerging from a heterogeneous religious tradition but obscuring religious differences, the Civil Religion has developed, as Durkheim would say, into "a collection of beliefs, symbols, and rituals with respect to sacred things and institutionalized in a collectivity."¹⁸

In assessing the work done to date, there can be discerned at least four discrete but somewhat overlapping approaches to the understanding of American civil religion.¹⁹ Although they appear to differ with respect to the meaning and function of the civil religion; each assumes its existence in some form - whether as a collective unconscious faith, or as a socially explicit common value system, or as what Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann have termed "a social construction of reality."²⁰

One view translates civil religion as folk religion. Beginning with the proposition that "every functioning society has a common religion,"²¹ this

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ cf. Russell Richey and Donald Jones, "The Civil Religion Debate" in Russell E. Richey and Donald G. Jones, eds., American Civil Religion (New York: Harper and Row, 1974), pp. 14-18.

²⁰ See The Social Construction of Reality: A Treatise in the Sociology of Knowledge (Garden City, New York: Doubleday, 1966). The idea of "a social construction of reality" is not so much concerned with whether a phenomenon exists, as with whether and in what ways what is real for the social scientist becomes real to other disciplines and to the lay-person. Hence the issue is utility and not ontology.

²¹ It is a widely held view of social scientists that there are certain societal functional prerequisites or necessary conditions without which a society could not continue to exist. Most observers list religion among the functional prerequisites. "The kind of religion, like the kind of family, can vary within extremely wide limits; but the absence of any religion, or the presence of sharply conflicting religions, impose severe strains that a society cannot long sustain." See J. Milton Yinger, The Scientific Study of Religion (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1970), pp. 20-21. See also Robin Williams, American Society, p. 312.

approach sees its task as being empirical rather than normative. By studying the actual life-style, symbols, rituals, values, loyalties, etc., of a society, conclusions can be drawn thereby regarding the existence and status of the common religion as it relates to the life of the folk and the need for group consciousness and an overarching sense of unity.²² Thus, Herberg described the American folkway as

"dynamic; optimistic; pragmatic; individualistic...and pluralistic... Culturally, the American Way exhibits an intense faith in education, significantly coupled with a disparagement of culture in the aesthetic sense; and, characteristically, an extraordinarily high moral valuation of...sanitation!"²³

It is from this point of view, therefore, that scholars such as Will Herberg, Robin Williams, and Floyd Warner are apt to make the judgment that the common religion of the folk, emerging as it does out of the folk-history, inevitably becomes a faith that competes with and presents grave problems for particularistic religions which are usually rooted in a perception of reality that transcends the common life of a people.

A second characterization of civil religion depicts it as the transcendent universal religion of the nation. Proponents of this view tend to emphasize the normative as distinct from the descriptive elements in the civil religion and therefore to assume a normative stance regarding its meaning and function. There is in this a more theological than sociological perspective. Thus, civil religion may function as a source of meaning and integration for a nation, but it may also render prophetic judgment on the nation. Its ability to do the

²² Will Herberg feels that the overarching unity of American society consists of "an organic structure of ideas, values, and beliefs that constitutes a faith common to Americans as Americans, and is genuinely operative in their lives." It may be considered a "religion" because "national life is apotheosized, national values are religionized, national heroes are divinized, national history is experienced as a Heilsgeschichte, as a redemptive history." "America's Civil Religion: What It Is and Whence It Comes," in Richey and Jones, American Civil Religion, pp. 77-78.

²³ Ibid., p. 79.

latter stems from the idea of religion as "a set of symbolic forms and acts that relate man to the ultimate conditions of his existence."²⁴ American civil religion at best, then, is an understanding of the American experience in the light of ultimate and universal values and reality. As Bellah points out,

"Religious symbols...do not 'embody the reality of the institutions' nor are they 'a symbolic projection of some aspect of society.' Religious symbols, civil or otherwise, primitive or modern, are symbols of ultimate reality. No matter how much embedded in other cultural forms...religious symbols always point beyond existing cultural and social structures and always have the potentiality of subjecting them to criticism."²⁵

In this sense, civil religion may not only stand in judgment of the folkways, it may also act as a corrective to idolatrous tendencies in the particular religions of a society.²⁶ Additionally, American civil religion, correctly understood as a reflection of transcendent universal reality, could become "simply one part of a new civil religion of the world,"²⁷ thereby realizing, in a kind of Hegelian fashion, the fulfillment of the particular in the universal.

Thirdly, some regard civil religion as neither utilitarian nor normative, but simply as religious nationalism. Here the nation does not become so much a church as it becomes the object of adoration and glorification. Politics is viewed as a matter of ultimate concern with patriotism as the motivating and sustaining force. The nation takes on a type of sovereign and self-transcend-

²⁴ Robert Bellah, "Rejoinder to Lockwood: 'Bellah and His Critics'" in Anglican Theological Review, 57(October, 1975), p. 418.

²⁵ Ibid. Bellah posits such universal values as freedom, justice, equality, and brotherhood.

²⁶ This is the major thrust of Sidney Mead, who is a major proponent of the transcendental view and who regards civil religion as "essentially prophetic." See "The 'Nation with the Soul of a Church'" in Richey and Jones, American Civil Religion, pp. 45-75.

²⁷ Richey and Jones, "The Civil Religion Debate," p. 16.

dent character which eventuates in a "religion of patriotism."²⁸

Martin Marty feels that this understanding of civil religion is particularly suited for assessing the public theology of President Nixon; for Nixon "takes the vocabulary of transcendence and applies it chiefly to his personal vision of the nation."²⁹ Marty is reflecting, in fact, the conclusion of Charles B. Henderson's vivid and penetrating study of the Nixon view of the nation in a book appropriately titled The Nixon Theology. Henderson states that

"Nixon systematically appropriates the vocabulary of the church - faith, trust, hope, belief, spirit - and applies these words not to a transcendent God but to his own nation, and worse, to his personal vision of what that nation should be...Lacking a transcendent God, he seems to make patriotism his religion, the American dream his deity."³⁰

Closely related to civil religion defined as religious nationalism is the notion of civil religion as "Protestant civic piety" or what Yehoshua Arieli has called "Protestant nationalism." Rather than a glorification per se of the nation, this view emphasizes the fusion of Protestantism and nationalism in the American ethos. That ethos is often identified as "Christian", in the sense of being permeated by "Protestant moralism, individualism, activism ('deeds not creeds. '), pragmatism, the work ethic, and the grand motif of 'missionizing the world.'"³¹ In this understanding of civil religion, then, the Cross and the Flag arouse the same sentiments and reverence.

A final interpretation of civil religion is that which has been termed

²⁸ See ibid.

²⁹ "Two Kinds of Two Kinds of Civil Religion" in Richey and Jones, American Civil Religion, p. 152.

³⁰ Quoted in ibid.

³¹ Richey and Jones, "The Civil Religion Debate," p. 17.

the democratic faith. A classic statement of this meaning of civil religion is the following, written in the context of nineteenth-century America:

"Romantic democracy consisted of a cluster of ideas and ideals that, taken together, made up a national faith which, although unrecognized as such, had the power of a state religion. Some of the ideas were as old as classical Greece and others as new as the American nation. But, though most of the ideas were old and had been handed down by tradition, the configuration of the cluster was unique. Taken together they comprise quite literally an American democratic faith."³²

Professor Gabriel identified these ideas in what he called "the three basic doctrines of the democratic faith". They are: 1) the doctrine of the natural moral law, 2) the doctrine of the free and responsible individual, and 3) the doctrine of the origin and mission of America.³³

In varying degrees, one may find "the democratic faith" implicit in the American Creed of Gunnar Myrdal, the democratic egalitarianism of Leo Marx, the common faith of John Dewey, and the democracy-as-religion of J. Paul Williams, to name only a few of its exponents. These and many others, including the present writer, feel that the humane values and ideals of justice, freedom, equality, and social welfare, which this point of view embraces, represent at least one expression of civil religion at its best in the American context. Indeed, it was the "democratic faith" that President Marsh was trying to reaffirm through the identification of documents in which that faith is entombed in its most noble and lasting elaboration - the "American Canon".

These definitions of civil religion have in common an attempt to understand this neoteric concept relative to its nature, source, content, and function. They differ, of course, in their answers and perspectives. The strength of the first definition - folk religion - is also its weakness. Although it is important to know the actual behavioral content of the civil religion at

³² Ralph H. Gabriel, The Course of American Democratic Thought (New York: The Ronald Press, 1956), p. 14.

³³ See ibid., pp. 12-25.

any given point in time, simply knowing this does not give us a perspective from which to judge that behavior unless we know the ideals and norms to which that behavior is related. Civil religion as religious nationalism suffers from a similar weakness. Love of country is no grievous fault, but when there is no distinction between the nation as it is and the nation as it ought to be, love of country becomes blind obedience and adoration.

The understanding of civil religion as the transcendental universal religion of the nation avoids the forementioned weakness but substitutes one of its own. Seeking to be normative, it moves so far away from the distinctive American experience that it becomes rather abstract. The emphasis on ultimacy obscures the fact that religion is a component in the cultural cognitive apparatus for helping a people to make sense of the whole of their experience, and not merely the "ultimate" problems.

Not simply by default, but rather because of its strengths, the idea of civil religion as the democratic faith appears to be the most salient and cogent interpretation. This "faith" is rooted in the American experience of founding a nation. Although the norms of the democratic faith are more universal than America, the casting of these norms and their configuration give them a peculiar American character. Furthermore, it is not the nation as such that is glorified; what is venerated is the nation's character - its ideals, aspirations, promises, and mission. These ideals transcend the actual experiences of Americans and provide the standards by which American behavior is judged by "American" norms.

Much more could be said in these regards, but suffice it to say that, to this writer, the only defensible view of American civil religion is the democratic faith. Obviously, others will demur in part or altogether. In any case, there is no doubt but that vigorous debate and discussion about civil religion

will continue, and it is a debate to which it seems appropriate to invite the participation of all those who call themselves Americans.

I conclude with some observations and remarks about America with reference to the "democratic faith."

The most profound and lasting challenge to face America in its domestic life is that of developing and fostering the degree of unity necessary to support immense diversity. America, perhaps like no other country, knows the profound difference between declaring nationhood and becoming a people, between social stability and social cohesion. Whether one chooses to view America as a melting pot, a vegetable stew, or a collage, there can be no obscuring of the fact that ours is and always has been a polyglot and polymeric society; compounded by the circumstance that, with the exception of the American Indian, all Americans originally held citizenship or were born in another nation. Some came to America voluntarily, others in chains; some in hope, others in despair. Our sociocultural situation has been described as resembling a colony of porcupines, precariously huddled together - close enough for sociability and protection but distant enough to avoid the quills!

The quills of our national pluralism have proved to be painful indeed. A cursory knowledge of our history would reveal the staggering degree of oppression, injustice, and evil that has been inflicted attendant to the differences in racial and ethnic membership, religious preference, political persuasion, and moral conviction. It is therefore astounding that such a society could persist, even for this relatively short period of two hundred years. It is even more amazing that such a society, founded on the principle of liberty and justice for all, has not degenerated into a system of regimentation and control. For those blessings, a large measure of credit is due the civil religion of

America - the "democratic faith."

Too often, however, this overarching "sacred canopy" has been overlooked by those who are so busy worshipping at the shrine of pluralism that they quite literally cannot see the forest for the trees. We must not allow our seeming national commitment to heterogeneity blind us to its basis. It is no conundrum to a social analyst to say that "pluralism does not have a leg to stand on because it has too many legs." Thus, it cannot be its own social foundation or its own social guarantor. For those tasks, the civil religion is the operative force in American society. The degree to which it is made operative will, in large part, determine whether such a nation can become a people (or, if you prefer, such people become a nation) and whether this nation "or any nation so conceived and so dedicated can long endure."

Historically, the "democratic faith" has operated as both a "driving" and a "restraining" force in the cause of unity amid diversity in American life. With regard to the former, it has provided us with a common set of ideals, rituals, and symbols that embody the crucial values of American existence and identity. Outside of geographic identity, it is the only common identity that we have; apart from crisis solidarity, it is the only unity that we know. In truth, one could make the case that the civil religion is the only thread that has held the social fabric together. No doubt, it has made toleration of differences, including religious toleration, possible.

As a "restraining" force in American society, the "democratic faith" operates primarily via what President Marsh called the "American Ten Commandments" - the Bill of Rights. It speaks not only to the question of individual and group rights, but also to the question of the conditions under which we may achieve national identity. Taken as a whole, those ten amendments state that if, however, and whenever we become a people, it will not be accomplished

at the cost of their abridgment. Hence our civil liberties function within the civil religion to proscribe the methods and measures to which we may be tempted to go in the interest of social cohesion.

For the past decade or so, however, it has been popular for some Christian theologians, minority group members, and others to condemn the civil religion out of hand for its alleged pretensions, idolatries, perversions, excesses, and threats to Christianity and the other "institutionalized" faiths. Some observers have suggested that, in any event, the civil religion with its basic symbols of identity is dead, a casualty of the sixties.³⁴ My rejoinder will be succinct but, hopefully, comprehensive.

There has been a tendency in much of the discussion of civil religion to equate it erroneously with the behavior and statements of both those who claim to profess it and those, who by virtue of their social and political status, should profess it. It is common knowledge, however, that every religion has its fanatics as well as its heretics; the civil religion is, in this respect, no exception. It is as vulnerable to misinterpretation and abuse as any other "religion". This fact was precisely the impetus for Marsh's "American Canon". He thought it unfair, if not uninformed, to judge the "democratic faith" (or any religion, for that matter) by its most unworthy adherents or its most radical apostates - i.e., to throw the baby out with the bath. This non sequitur is equally applicable to the frequent incidence of un-Christian behavior by those who call themselves Christian.

By and large, when we have allowed the "democratic faith" to serve well, it has served us well. In the last analysis, it has been the transcendent themes and values of the civil religion itself that have addressed its own here-

³⁴ See, for example, Sidney E. Ahlstrom, A Religious History of the American People (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1972), p. 1085.

sies. These themes and values have provided a solid bulwark against the tides of counterfit "Americanism", whether in the form of racism, imperialism, exclusivism, militarism, or despotism. Moreover, social and liberation movements in this country have consistently utilized the civil religion as a point of departure. Especially was this true in such recent items as ending American involvement in Vietnam (for, echoing the National Anthem, "our cause was not just"), exposing the Watergate conspiracy, and attacking segregation and discrimination (including that found within the American churches). It would appear safe to say, therefore, that the reports of the death of the civil religion are greatly exaggerated!

The sixties, however, were a time of trial for the nation and what it stands for. Although that verdict is still somewhat ambiguous, it portends much of the future of the "democratic faith". Unfortunately, many Americans did not realize that what was really on trial was not the civil religion, but the lack of congruence between the American ideals, on the one hand, and the American institutions and leadership, on the other. Perhaps we will yet be able to differentiate the lasting worth of the fundamental values of the "democratic faith" - freedom, justice, equality, and brotherhood - and the sources of the national recalcitrance and inertia which retard making those values living realities for all Americans.

In 1963, some 250,000 Americans converged on the nation's capital in late August. At the Lincoln Memorial we gathered - blacks and whites, rich and poor - and heard one Martin Luther King, Jr., speak of a dream which was rooted in the American Dream. "This," he said, "will be the day when all God's children will be able to sing with new meaning: 'My country 'tis of thee, sweet land of liberty, of thee I sing. Land where my fathers died, land of the pilgrim's pride, from every mountainside, let freedom ring.'" He concluded,

"When we let freedom ring, when we let it ring from every village and hamlet, from every state and every city, we will be able to speed up that day when all God's children, black men and white men, Jews and Gentiles, Protestants and Catholics, will be able to join hands and sing in the words of that old Negro spiritual: 'Free at last! Free at last! Thank God Almighty, we are free at last.'"

To some of us, this was American civil religion's finest hour!

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